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THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

Combat Motivation of the Lonely Eagles

by

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Abstract

The Tuskegee Airmen, the best-known black unit in US history, played a pivotal role in the desegregation of the US military institution, and provided momentum to the civil-rights movement as a whole. However, conventional wisdom employs this as a point-of-departure, concluding that the Tuskegee Airmen were aware of the significance of their actions relative to the strategic-level civil-rights struggle. Is this leap of logic grounded in fact? The author explores the civil-rights movement of the 1930's and 1940's, the history of the Tuskegee Airmen, and the connection between the two. The research reveals evidence that refutes the conventional wisdom, pointing instead to initial and combat motivators more consistent with those found in research of other combatant groups. Finally, the author builds upon Kindsvatter's conclusions in *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam* to explain the pervasiveness of the debunked myth.

A review of the literature in the field of study of combat motivation reveals striking similarities despite the vast array of circumstances experienced by combatants. Though potentially surprising to the novice reader, it is not shocking that soldiers' wartime motivations, both initial and combat, would be relatively consistent despite their conflicts of involvement spanning from the American Civil War to today. No matter the race, color, sex, belief system, historical period, or conflict of a given combatant, all are human beings. Human nature remains remarkably constant. Thus, the Civil-War-era motivators McPherson identified in *For Cause and Comrades* – initial motivators included patriotism, ideology, duty, honor, manhood and community/peer pressure, while combat motivators included primary group cohesion and peer pressure – repeatedly surface in studies of later wars, and in soldiers of varying nationalities.¹

Why, then, does the prevailing thought on one of World War II's (WWII) most famous units, the Tuskegee Airmen, differ? The Tuskegee Airmen, the best-known black unit in US history, played a pivotal role in the desegregation of the US military institution, and provided momentum to the civil-rights movement as a whole. However, conventional wisdom employs this as a point-of-departure, concluding that the Tuskegee Airmen were aware of the significance of their actions relative to the strategic-level civil-rights struggle.² Furthermore, that they leveraged this awareness as a combat motivator, enabling their record-setting achievements.

Where does this leap in logic come from? Is it based in fact? Were the members of the Tuskegee Airmen all visionary young men motivated by a prescient understanding of the strategic implications of their success or failure? The Tuskegee Airmen were, like all war-time additions to the Army Air Corps pilot training programs, well-educated young men with all of the normal interests associated therein. As African-Americans, they were painfully aware of the racial inequities of the time. Like many blacks of the period, they participated in the struggle against segregation at the local – tactical – level. They were aware, in a vague sort of way, that

their success or failure would have some kind of impact on the future roles of blacks in combat and the services. However, they did not perceive themselves as the battering ram that would knock down the walls of segregation in the US military, let alone envision their service as a catalyst that would accelerate the strategic-level civil-rights movement within the United States. Lacking that vision, the Tuskegee Airmen found combat motivation in the same places as those who went before, primary group cohesion and community/peer pressure.

The Civil-Rights Movement – Late ‘30s/Early ‘40s

Recognizing the novelty of, and excitement for, manned flight, the black civil-rights movement began allying itself with, and co-opting the public fervor for, black aviation pioneers as early as the mid 1920’s. However, it took more than a decade for this strategy to reach fruition. “The Negro press, civil rights organizations, and Negro aviation all came of age in 1936.”³ As the only mass communication tool available to the black community, black newspapers were the medium of choice for disseminating information of national significance to blacks.⁴ Thus, men like Robert Vann, publisher of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, gained considerable power and political influence on the national scene. Vann utilized the *Courier*, and the national recognition and influence it provided him, to spearhead the civil and political rights movement, “including [advocating for] the rights of African-Americans to participate in nontraditional occupations, and especially in aviation.”⁵

In the days leading up to Pearl Harbor, Vann, and other prominent leaders of the Negro press, the NAACP, and pro-Negro Congressional committees, recognized the war’s potential strategic-level implications for the civil-rights movement. Given the opportunity to participate in combat units, and assuming they – as in previous wars – acquitted themselves well, blacks could establish a precedent for full inclusion in military service. Unfortunately, Vann passed away before witnessing the fruits of his labor, but even his death created opportunity. With tightly

contested elections only weeks away, Democratic Party leaders desperately needed to secure the black vote without alienating southern, white Democrats. Thus, seeking to capitalize on the emotion surrounding Vann's death, President Roosevelt appointed Judge William Hastie as the Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, and announced Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Sr.'s promotion to Brigadier General – the first black General Officer in US history – the day after Vann's death.⁶ At the time, B. O. Davis Sr., and his son, B. O. Davis Jr., were the only black Regular Army officers outside the Chaplain Corps.⁷

Throughout the early 1940's, Judge Hastie, General Davis, other prominent blacks, and pro-Negro supporters, continued to advocate for training and deployment of black combat troops, with particular emphasis given to the admittance of African-Americans as pilots in the Army Air Corps. Their efforts paid off when, in March of 1941, the Army announced the activation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first black flying unit in the Army Air Corps. Hastie and the NAACP were not appreciative of the creation of a "Jim Crow Air Corps," preferring instead to integrate blacks into existing aviation squadrons – an idea never seriously considered by the Army Air Corps.⁸ However, many in the black press recognized this as "a step in the right direction... [though] by no means the answer to the demand of colored people for full integration into all branches of the arms and services of the nation."⁹ As was typical, General Davis did not take a public stance on the issue. Though he endured criticism for his disciplined and patient approach – a requirement for an active-duty officer with a political agenda – when struggling against racism, Davis' influence within the War Department was critical to the continuation of the Tuskegee Experiment and to the 99th receiving combat deployment orders in 1943.

The Tuskegee Airmen

The inaugural class of the Tuskegee Experiment commenced training on 19 July 1941.¹⁰ Of the thirteen cadets initially enrolled in class 42-C, only five completed the training required

for graduation. The course culminated on 6 March 1942 with the receipt of their wings, and, for everyone except Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the awarding of their commissions as Second Lieutenants.¹¹ Already a Captain when he began the training, the Army promoted Davis Jr. twice in the final weeks of training, making him a Lieutenant Colonel and eligible to command the 99th upon graduation. An additional seven classes of cadets graduated from Tuskegee over the course of the next six months, bringing the pilot compliment of the 99th Pursuit Squadron to thirty-three. Rounded out with the required ground crew, medical and administrative personnel, the squadron was now at combat strength and ready to deploy.¹²

Unfortunately, senior members of the War Department had other ideas. They seemed determined keep the 99th in perpetual pre-deployment training. Squadron members feared that leadership would deny them the opportunity to prove themselves in combat. However, evidence suggests that the delay was more a factor of the War Department and Army Air Corp searching for a politically acceptable combat deployment. Ironically, they were concerned with finding a combat location that provided the 99th the greatest chance of success, though avoiding the appearance of setting the squadron up for failure was the motivating factor.¹³

While the 99th prepared for an ever-elusive deployment, the Tuskegee program continued to produce pilots. The Air Corps activated the 100th Pursuit Squadron in May of 1942, treating it as a bullpen for replacements destined to cover the combat losses of the 99th. However, with the 99th delayed, the 100th quickly reached capacity, necessitating two additional squadrons – the 301st and 302nd. When combined, these three squadrons comprised the 332nd Fighter Group.

Finally, on 15 April 1943, the long awaited day arrived. The 99th shipped out for North Africa. Though reports were less favorable at the time, history has shown that, over the four and a half months that followed, the 99th was remarkably successful for a green unit. Even more so considering they could not benefit from a pairing with an experienced “sister squadron,” were

short-changed on pilots from day one, and received no replacements for three months. The squadron relocated to Sicily in late July, where they continued their dive-bombing and strafing missions. On 2 September 1943, Lieutenant Colonel Davis relinquished command of the 99th in order to return to the US to assume command of the 332nd Fighter Group.¹⁴

Instead, the Air Corps diverted Colonel Davis to Washington to testify before the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies, commonly known as the McCloy Committee. In response to both a *Time* magazine article and memorandums from the 99th's combat chain-of-command, the McCloy Committee convened hearings that threatened the continued existence of the Tuskegee Airmen. Specifically, Colonel Davis responded to accusations of laziness, poor air-discipline, and cowardice on the part of the 99th.¹⁵ In all likelihood, fear of political fallout associated with dismembering the Tuskegee Experiment did more to influence Air Corps leadership than did Davis' testimony, nonetheless, the final decision was to leave the 99th in the Mediterranean theatre and continue with the deployment of the 332nd.

The political battle won, or at least sidelined, Davis assumed command of the 332nd and prepared the unit for combat. They departed for Italy on 31 December 1943. Shortly thereafter, in April of 1944, the Air Corps reassigned the 99th, making them the fourth squadron of the 332nd Fighter Group. Once again, they fell under the command of Colonel Davis. April also witnessed the transfer of the 332nd to the 15th Strategic Air Force.¹⁶ This reassignment heralded a change in mission. The Tuskegee Airmen were now in the business of long-range bomber escort.

Bomber escort proved to be the mission set that would cement the Tuskegee Airmen's place in history. During the remainder of the war in Europe, the men of the 332nd flew more than 200 escort missions. Though quietly contested by some of the men of the unit, including Colonel Davis, official Air Force records credited the 332nd as having never lost a bomber under their protection to enemy aircraft aggression.¹⁷ This feat is unmatched.

Motivation & Results

In the study of motivation as it relates to war, initial motivation refers to the reason or reasons that drive an individual to volunteer for service, or, if conscripted, to submit to the draft. In the case of Tuskegee, many of the support personnel – aircraft maintenance and ground crew, administrative support personnel, etc. – were previously soldiers in the regular Army. They volunteered to cross-train into the strictly segregated Army Air Corps because they believed it offered a “more exciting and rewarding career.”¹⁸ However, the pilots, those men commonly referred to as the Tuskegee Airmen, were a different story.

Aviation training in the Army Air Corps/US Air Force has always been a voluntary undertaking. Thus, with the notable exception of Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the Tuskegee Airmen entered the Air Corps directly from civilian life, representing a diverse range of backgrounds. (Members grew up and attended college in both the North and South, had varied employment backgrounds, and came from diverse socio-economic situations. The one constant was education. All Tuskegee Airmen had some higher education experience; many had at least one degree.)¹⁹ Though undoubtedly aware of the potential for conscription into the regular Army, fear of that possibility fails to account for their choice to join the Air Corps specifically. Furthermore, while traditional initial motivators – patriotism, ideology, duty, honor, manhood and community/peer pressure – were abundant and explain the men’s call to service, these also do not account for the choice to join the Army Air Corps.²⁰

In the early 1940’s, aviation was still in its infancy. Black participation in aviation was even more so. The possibility of flight had captured mankind’s imagination for centuries, and the Negro press had been publishing stories of black aviation pioneers for nearly two decades.²¹ In his memoir, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, Tuskegee Airman Alexander Jefferson describes reading the daily paper as an educational tool. In so doing, he likely encountered the

exploits of popular black fliers like Bessie Coleman and Hubert Julian. By age ten, he tells readers, he routinely skipped school to hang out at a nearby airport, doing odd jobs and helping the aircraft mechanics. Jefferson says, "I also got my first ride in a bi-winged plane that I believe was a Waco. If my mother had known this, she would have killed me."²² Given the period, it is not surprising that most Tuskegee Airmen, like Jefferson, chose to volunteer for the Army Air Corps out of a childhood love of flying. Additionally, an extension of the classic manhood motivator, many Airmen also felt compelled to prove that they as an individual, and as a people, could fly, fight, and win.²³ This motivator had clear carryover into combat.

Unlike initial motivation, combat motivation characterizes the reasons combatants will continue to fight despite potentially deadly opposition from a hostile enemy. For the Tuskegee Airmen, given the social and political obstacles they faced daily, the term combat motivation applies just as readily to their pre-deployment training experiences as it does their actual combat deployments. The desire to prove they "could master the most complex and dangerous machinery," and had something significant to contribute to the war effort, provided the Tuskegee Airmen motivation throughout training and combat in WWII.²⁴ Essentially, members of the Experiment were "determined...not to give satisfaction to those who would like to see [them] fail."²⁵

This determination is representative of, though greatly amplified in magnitude, the classic peer pressure motivator. In the case of the Tuskegee Airmen, not only did they carry a responsibility to their primary group, but also to the greater African-American community. While in command of the 99th, Colonel Davis claims he was dominated by a desire to be a credit to the unit, not only to allow the 99th to compare favorably to white aviation squadrons, but also to prove he merited the respect of his men. Furthermore, the Colonel provided motivation to his men by suggesting that good combat performance on the part of the unit would ease the way for

future blacks in the Army Air Corps.²⁶ Contrary to conventional thought though, the Tuskegee Airmen did not have a mystical ability to translate this motivation into super-human flying skills.

Though skill and luck certainly played a part, the Tuskegee Airmen's astonishing feat of zero air combat losses of escorted bombers was primarily the result of good leadership.

Benjamin O. Davis Jr. was the right man for the job. Raised by a moderate, self-disciplined Army officer, and tempered by four years of silent treatment at West Point, Colonel Davis was discipline incarnate.²⁷ It was discipline that made the Tuskegee Airmen the most successful bomber-escort unit of WWII. While many white escort pilots deserted their charges for the slightest chance of an air-to-air kill, the men of the 332nd stayed true. Colonel Davis mandated that the success of the unit out-weighed individual glory.²⁸ According to Charles McGee, "[Colonel Davis] instilled in us that our mission was to protect those bombers from enemy fighters...if we heard German aircraft in the air and they weren't attacking the bomb group, we didn't go off looking for them. We stayed with the bombers."²⁹ Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr. "held his men to his own exacting standards, and although they would never love 'The Thin Man,' they would respect him and follow him anywhere."³⁰

Debunking the Myth

Had any member of the 332nd understood the strategic implications of their actions to the US civil-rights movement, undoubtedly that man would have been Colonel Davis. Not only was he the unit commander and the one with the most military experience, but he also had the advantage of being the son of the only, at that time, black General Officer in US history. His father was highly placed within the War Department, directly involved with all African-American-related issues therein, and personally associated with Robert Vann, Judge Hastie, and senior leaders of the NAACP and negro press. Colonel Davis was connected. Yet, he maintained that at no time during the course of the Second World War did the possibility of an

integrated Air Corp ever occur to him. His goal was simply to ensure the continued opportunity for blacks to serve as aviators. Integration of the services did not occur to him as a possibility until at least 1946 or 1947.³¹

Other Tuskegee Airmen agree. Alexander Jefferson, one of only thirty-two Tuskegee Airmen to become a prisoner-of-war, suggests two reasons for their lack of strategic foresight regard the implications of the success or failure of the Experiment. Blacks had proven themselves previously in every major conflict in US history, to no avail. Additionally, they knew they were the “cream of the crop” and “would not [fail].”³² No matter the reason though, Jefferson is clear that the true significance of their contribution to the civil-rights movement only became apparent to them in hindsight.³³

Where then does the myth of prescience come from? The story of the Tuskegee Airmen was largely unknown until 1995. This changed with the release of the hit HBO movie, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, which exposed the average American to the exploits of the 332nd for the first time. Though not directly cited as such, the movie clearly draws heavily on two seminal books on the topic. *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of WWII* and *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* were published in 1992 and 1994, respectively. Both books make unsubstantiated, or poorly substantiated, claims of greater awareness on the part of the 332nd.³⁴ Furthermore, they imply that this awareness was a combat motivator.³⁵

Never ones to miss a compelling story line, movie producers latched onto, and carefully recreated, this image for viewers. There is an emotional scene between a fictitious member of the 99th – played by Laurence Fishburne – and the movie’s Colonel Davis, during which Fishburne’s character, upset by the squadron’s lack of air-to-air action and the Colonel’s nonchalance, states, “...I think we all have something to prove!” Shortly thereafter, while defending the unit to the movie’s version of the McCloy Committee, Davis claims that when his

men go to battle they “carry the hopes of an entire people as well.”³⁶ The message, though conveyed to the viewer via a combination of verbal and non-verbal cues, is clear: “We understand that our performance in combat will directly affect the future of blacks in America, and we intend to rise to the challenge.”

Though Hollywood may have disseminated the myth, individuals are to blame for internalizing it. A search of online reviews reveals dozens of “history buffs” and other supposedly knowledgeable individuals raving over the “historical accuracy” of the movie.³⁷ Furthermore, many have picked up on, and regurgitated, the film’s underlying messages of “motivation from the need to prove themselves” and future “implications for blacks in the military and America.”³⁸

In a fast-paced culture characterized by celebrity and sports-hero worship, and 24/7 news media outlets that spoon-feed predigested bits of information, the public has stopped thinking critically about the information presented to them. As a result, Hynes’s “war-in-the-head” phenomenon, and Kindsvatter’s derivative assertion that “expectations about the next war [are] derived from the images of the previous ones generated by the mass media, popular literature, and the memorialization process”, easily convey to modern day.³⁹ However, instead of a romanticized vision of war based upon works of historically based fiction, in the case of the Tuskegee Airmen story, popular perception of history itself has been romanticized. Therein lies the danger of commercialized – and consequently, sensationalized – history.

Conclusion

Made famous by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the “‘Double-V’ battle cry stood for victory over Jim Crow at home and victory over the nation’s enemies abroad.”⁴⁰ For the men of the 332nd Fighter Group, this equated to several things: successful completion of pilot training once admitted; combat deployment; unit success in combat commensurate with, or exceeding that of,

comparable white units; an assured future for African-Americans as pilots in the post-war Army Air Corps. The Tuskegee Airmen volunteered for service for a variety of reasons, but for most individuals those reasons included a love of flying and a desire to prove oneself. Their motivations in combat included the interactions of peer pressure – both micro and macro – and primary group dynamics. However, strategic-level civil-rights achievements were not the purview of the Tuskegee Airmen. Those were thoughts for “great men” like Robert Vann, William Hastie, and Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP. Like all young men at war, the Tuskegee Airmen had more immediate considerations: fighting, dying, dreams of women, home, and their futures.

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- ¹ McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 3-178.
Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 1-235.
Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare*, 1-213.
Bergerud, *Touched with Fire*, 1-532.
Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, xii-293.
- ² Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 176.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁷ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 26.
- ⁸ Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 19.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ¹¹ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 36.
- ¹² Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 159.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174-178.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185-191.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁷ Davis, Jr., Interview Transcript, 141.
Tuskegee University Office of Marketing and Communications, "Tuskegee Airmen Facts."
- ¹⁸ Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 150.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-154.
Jefferson and Carlson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 5-22.
Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 37.
Smith, *Tuskegee Airman*, 12-38.
- ²⁰ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, xiii.
- ²¹ Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 26-73.
- ²² Jefferson and Carlson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 14 & 23.
- ²³ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, xiii.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Smith, *Tuskegee Airman*, 48.
- ²⁶ Davis, Jr., Interview Transcript, 84 & 108-109.
- ²⁷ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 26.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ²⁹ Smith, *Tuskegee Airman*, 61.
- ³⁰ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 140.
- ³¹ Davis, Jr., Interview Transcript, 81.
- ³² Jefferson and Carlson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, xvii.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 119-120.
- ³⁴ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, xii.
Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 171 & 189
- ³⁵ Scott and Womack, *Double V*, 176 & 191.
- ³⁶ Markowitz, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, DVD.
- ³⁷ Ella, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, online film review.

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- ³⁸ Tony Scott, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, online film review.
American Humane, Film & Television Unit, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, online film review.
Coreno, *Democracy Begins At Home*, online film review.
- ³⁹ Quoted in Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 285.
Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 286.
- ⁴⁰ Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 63.

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